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Brief 18: Creating a Culture of Inquiry

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NERCHE BRIEF

**New England Resource Center for Higher Education
March 2005**

The following Brief from the New England Resource Center for Higher Education (NERCHE) is a distillation of the work by members of NERCHE's think tanks and projects from a wide range of institutions. NERCHE Briefs emphasize policy implications and action agendas from the point of view of the people who tackle the most compelling issues in higher education in their daily work lives. With funding from the Ford Foundation, NERCHE disseminates these pieces to a targeted audience of higher education leaders and media contacts. The Briefs are designed to add critical information and essential voices to the development of higher education policies and the improvement of practice at colleges and universities.

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Creating a Culture of Inquiry

The Community College Student Success Think Tank, part of the Community College Student Success Project, funded by Lumina Foundation for Education, brings student and academic affairs officers together with institutional researchers to reflect on trends and issues surrounding data-driven decision making in community colleges. Participants consider various forms of accountability data, processes and analyses to bring about institutional transformation. At a recent meeting, Think Tank members discussed ways to create a culture of inquiry at community colleges.

Mission impossible? Community college missions are complex and far-reaching. They offer a leg up to families, many of them recent immigrants, seeking to gain a financial foothold on an uneven economic terrain. They prepare students for transfer to four-year institutions. They provide working adults with the skills they need to compete in a rapidly changing workforce. And they hope to instill in those who pass through their doors an interest in lifelong learning. Community colleges expand their educational offerings to meet changing markets and community needs. This, along with the isolation of

divisions, departments, and programs within institutions and the subsequent lack of communication between them, can result in a fragmented institutional vision.

With their strong emphases on the classroom, community colleges have focused most on teaching and less on traditional forms of research that can promote an inquiry-based approach to understanding internal institutional practices. The assessment movement, however, has proved to be much more than an educational trend for all institutions of higher education, and the development of meaningful student outcomes is the destination at which most all community colleges have arrived. The deeper questions of relationships between teaching and learning and student success are evolving in a developing culture of inquiry and change.

External drivers Assessment, evaluation and accountability resonate with a broad constituency in the public sector, especially among legislators who are eager to attach results to dollars. As with four-year institutions, external pressures for accountability have helped shape how community colleges understand themselves and their missions. Mandates from SHEEOs, while sometimes unwelcome, have created opportunities for community colleges to examine the gaps between institutional rhetoric and outcomes—a process that can help translate broad institutional missions into clear evidence of institutional success.

Recommendations

- *Improving internal processes* The first step along the way to achieving a strong relationship between institutional vision and outcomes involves gaining clarity about internal processes. One useful method for focusing institutional conversations and actions is the Balanced Scorecard, a one-page depiction of the strategic plan that ties it to outcomes assessment, informs strategic planning and from which a *strategy map* can be developed. (Robert Kaplan and David Norton, 1996). The scorecard takes a holistic, systems approach that is generated from the major components of the mission. The scorecard, which encourages institutional participants to think carefully about the kinds of

questions that need to be considered before outcomes are decided upon, can be central to institutional discussions, from the cabinet level to individual units and departments.

The strategy map can be an internal one-page report that includes current and longitudinal measures along with an objective narrative about what the institution has done over time and where it plans to go. With a series of measures and a systematic approach to measurement one can keep track of progress.

- *Program review* Involvement in program review acts as a mechanism to engage faculty in a culture of inquiry that emphasizes constructing meaningful questions about program mission and outcomes in order to collect appropriate evidence. Faculty, perhaps accustomed to intuiting causal relationships involving teaching and learning, are making thoughtful and explicit connections between their teaching and the knowledge, skills and ways of thinking they want to develop in students. This process requires them to draw upon research capabilities, which can be fostered through the careful creation of an assessment process.

To achieve investment in assessment, faculty who are involved must be given the opportunity to exercise real control over the review process, whether they choose to devise an internal review process themselves, elect to work with an outside consultant, or develop other structures. So that faculty retain ownership of the process, administrators may want to function as guides or coaches and take the lead on procuring resources.

Faculty working in programs that must meet external accrediting or licensing standards or are already engaged in evaluating the technical aspects of their programs can often spearhead a program review process. Once faculty support is successfully mobilized in one program, the momentum can be extended to programs where faculty may be less willing to engage in such activities.

As critical to the process of developing outcomes and measures are the conversations among faculty members that surface important philosophical questions and lead to deeper understandings of program intentions and goals in the context of institutional missions.

Administrators can help faculty be in touch with national assessment trends by supporting presentations at local, regional, and national conferences.

Collaborative presentations of faculty and administrative staff are especially powerful in fostering a culture of reflection and deeper engagement in the review process. This also provides exemplary local programs with a broader regional and national showcase. At the same time, faculty and administrators can expand their thinking about the review process by writing for grants such as Title III, to support locally developed innovations.

- **Resources** Writing grants can invigorate faculty and allow them to customize program review initiatives, yet to effect this kind of sweeping change that is fundamentally linked to the educational mission of community colleges requires a firm commitment of resources. Chief academic officers, who see their job as keeping assessment at the institutional forefront, have been creative at locating start-up funding; however, to sustain a culture of ongoing inquiry requires a concomitant institutional commitment of resources and support. Experience shows that momentum can disappear after a pivotal event, such as a regional accreditation visit, or the loss of key personnel unless the effort is anchored firmly in the core of the college.

Directors of institutional research are critical to the process of shaping a culture of inquiry, but their time is often consumed by responding to multiple requests from external constituents for data. For directors to lend their expertise to institutional efforts, funding should be available to support other staff to manage these requests. Unencumbered by data demands, IR directors are positioned to help faculty and staff think like researchers.

As programs and markets change, so too will the outcomes that students will need to master making it necessary for faculty and staff to be able to think fluidly and with a sense of exploration about their work in an organizational structure that supports mission clarity and institutional responsiveness.

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